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Film Review: *1948 Creation and Catastrophe*

By Melissa Sanford

“It is not a war of soldiers, it’s a war of people, of children.”

This poignant observation comes from Hava Keller, an Israeli veteran of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War during which she served with the *Haganah*.¹ Keller’s observation about the nature of the war came while she participated in a military operation near Acre and was confronted with the scene of an abandoned Palestinian home in which a pair of children’s shoes had been left behind in the rush to flee the approaching Jewish forces. The war of 1948 lasted from December 1947 to March 1949, displacing as many as 750,000 Palestinian Arabs and resulting in the creation of the modern state of Israel.² Today the Arab-Israeli conflict is frequently viewed as an eternal war between members of incompatible religions with no chance of peace on the horizon. This inaccurate perspective primarily stems from the misrepresentation and gross oversimplification of the conflict in Western media. In truth, the conflict concerning the land of what is now known as Israel is multifaceted and modern in its origin; it is not some inexorable struggle doomed to carry on for eternity. The ongoing struggle litters headlines across the world, some of which include the United States’ decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the arrest and incarceration of sixteen-year-old Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi, and the growing support for the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction Israel) movement.³

¹ The *Haganah* was Jewish a paramilitary organization which became the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) following the 1948 war and Israeli declaration of independence. Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: a History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins), 2017.

² Violence in Palestine followed the 1947 United Nations approval of partition, but Israel did not go to war with the Arab states (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq) until its declaration of independence in May of 1948 and did not end until March 1949.

³ The BDS movement seeks to end Israeli policies that oppress the Palestinian people through economic pressure with tactics are similar to those used to end the apartheid state in South Africa. Dalia Hatuqa, “BDS Activists Defy U.S. Moves to Curb Palestine Advocacy.” *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2017, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/bds-united-states-170412005811306.html>.

As always, the best way to understand the present situation is to uncover the past. The documentary film *1948: Creation and Catastrophe* seeks to provide vital context for the Arab-Israeli Conflict through interviews with witnesses, survivors, and historians of the Palestinian *Nakba*.⁴ Through these combined testimonies, *1948* paints a compelling portrait of the pain and complexities of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War in a way that truly deepens the viewers' understanding of the conflict.

The years preceding the 1948 Arab-Israeli War were marred by growing violence and tensions between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews. The strain between these communities had grown steadily since the inception of Zionist programs in Palestine. In 1922, tensions increased significantly between Palestinian Arabs and the Jewish community, or the *Yishuv* as it was known prior to the establishment of Israel. The primary cause of these tensions was the Zionists' expressed intention to create a Jewish state in Palestine under British guidance.⁵ Forging a Jewish state necessitated increasing the Jewish population in Palestine, and the acquisition of more territory for the Jewish immigrants. These territorial gains in turn came at the expense of the Palestinian Arab community. In addition to territorial losses, Arabs within the Mandatory Palestine⁶ witnessed a simultaneous loss of jobs due to exclusionary labor practices supported by Labor Zionists.⁷ This spurred the revolt of the Muslim and Christian Arabs of Palestine which lasted from 1936–1939. Nevertheless, the need for the Mandate to accept more Jewish immigrants became paramount during and following the Holocaust due the monumental number

⁴ Meaning “disaster” or “catastrophe” in Arabic, *Al Nakba* is the term referring to the 1948 war and resulting exodus of the Palestinian Arabs. "Definition of al-Nakba in US English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/al-nakba>.

⁵ Zionism is a nationalist ideology based on the concept of creating a homeland for the Jewish people. The territory of Palestine was not agreed upon as the location until 1897 at the Basel Congress by the World Zionist Organization. Smith, “*Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*,” 31.

⁶ The mandate system was established by the League of Nations after World War I in order to enable the British and French takeover of former German and Ottoman lands. Mandatory Palestine encompassed much of modern Israel, Palestine and the Gaza Strip. Smith, “*Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*,” 561.

⁷ Labor Zionism is the ideology that resulted form of the blending of Zionism and socialism.

of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi occupied Europe. Accepting the immigrants into Israel became increasingly difficult due to immigration caps set by British authorities. The caps were intended to ease rising tensions between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists by limiting the flow of refugees into the Mandate. In practice, they further strained the tenuous relationship between Zionist political organizations and British authorities, ultimately leading to a string of increasingly violent attacks against British forces, culminating in the bombing of the King David Hotel by the *Irgun* (a revisionist Zionist paramilitary group) in 1946. This acceleration of violence necessitated the formation of UNSCOP (United Nations Special Committee on Palestine) which called for the end of the British mandate and proposed the partition of Palestine. Following a majority “yes” vote at the United Nations for the partition (which gave Zionists 56 percent of Mandatory Palestine despite being a minority population), violence between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews intensified dramatically, signaling the start of the 1948 war.

1948: Creation and Catastrophe, directed and produced by filmmaker Andy Trimlett and California State San Bernardino communications professor Ahlam Muhtaseb, establishes much of this background and begins its telling of the story of 1948 through oral testimony. This film has been 10 years in the making. During this time the creators conducted more than 90 interviews in seven different countries. Through oral accounts and interviews with noted historians the film guides the viewer through the beginnings of the violence following the United Nations partition to the implementation of Plan Dalet, the infamous massacre of Dayr Yassin, the attacks on Haifa and Jaffa, the declaration of the state of Israel, the assault on Acre, and Operation Dani, which resulted in the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Lydda and Ramleh. The battles between Jewish and Arab forces and the methods used to remove the Arab Palestinians from cities and villages is explored through the words of the those who participated in the removal as well as those who endured it. These events are crucial to clearly understanding of the creation and catastrophe of 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

The interpretation of the some of the most pivotal events of the war are mired in controversy. Particularly contentious is whether or the ethnic cleansing that occurred during the *Nakba*, through Plan Dalet and subsequent orders, was deliberate. Plan

Dalet (Plan D) was adopted on March 10, 1948 by the *Haganah* and outlined plans for how the militia would defend the territory after the British forces left. The plan's intentions and whether it was officially carried out are a source of considerable controversy. The debate over the origin and execution of ethnic cleansing during the *Nakba* is sharply divided between those who claim that the Palestinians left of their own volition, and those who argue that they were forcibly expelled.

Proponents of the "new historian" perspective, such as Benny Morris, argue that the Israeli military did not forcibly remove Palestinian Arabs, rather that Arab military officials urged Palestinians to flee. Thereby shifting the collective memory of the 1948 conflict in favor Israel by absolving the nation of any responsibility for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.⁸ Conversely, historian Ilan Pappé's directly challenges Morris' version of events. Pappé maintains that Plan D, and following orders, were officially given with the intent to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian Arabs from their ancestral land. The manner in which the Palestinians were forced to flee is of great importance as it determines their status as refugees. Had the Arab Palestinians left of their own accord, without threat of force, they would not be considered refugees with ties to the land and would not have the right to return. This, however, is a very selective understanding of the war. As shown in *1948: Creation and Catastrophe*, members of the Israeli military fully understood that the purpose of Plan D was to expel Arab Palestinians from their lands and villages. *1948* is instrumental to the wider understanding of the complex nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict because it provides much needed context for the deeply politicized, and often misunderstood struggle, through the accounts of those who experienced it first hand.

In an interview with co-director and executive producer of the film, Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb explained the origins of this project: "It all started with my field research in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria in 2006. I wanted to study Palestinian refugees' narratives of diaspora intergenerationally and how that impacted their collective national identity outside of their homeland." The interviews involve many well-known figures who participated in the 1948 war, including author and peace activist

⁸ Joel Beinin, "No More Tears," Middle East Research and Information Project, accessed March 12, 2018. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer230/no-more-tears>.

Uri Avnery, and author and politician Mordecai Bar-On, as well as notable historians such as, Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris, Charles Smith, and Rashid Khalidi. Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb relayed that only thirty-three of the ninety interviews conducted were included in the documentary. Indeed, the process of deciding what to include in the film was very difficult. Dr. Muhtaseb recalls, “It was a torturous process...There were interviews that we immediately identified as not very valuable or usable for the purpose of the film, but there were many that were great, and we included them in the rough cut, but they didn’t make it to the...final cut.” Not only was the process of deciding what to include in the film difficult, but the interviews themselves were at times very emotionally taxing. Dr. Muhtaseb also described the shockingly tragic story of Othman Akel, who was an 11-year old resident of the Dayr Yassin village at the time of the massacre. During his escape he witnessed the brutal killing of at least 12 different people by Zionist gangs, including his father, brother, two uncles, and elderly grandfather. Despite the emotional pain and trauma expressed in the interviews, Dr. Muhtaseb was able to maintain her composure and it was not until the editing process that she realized the true weight of the interviews: “Only when I came back to the States and started viewing the footage and looking at the materials that it hit me; ‘wow, how could have I done this? How have I maintained my sanity and composure etc.’”. The brutality of the materials definitely hit me afterwards, not during.” Dr. Muhtaseb’s reaction is understandable as the intense emotional pain experienced by those interviewed is apparent to the viewer. Through these harrowing oral testimonies, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the tragic events of 1948.

Arguably, the most important contribution that *1948* provides are the interviews with the survivors and witnesses which, due to the ages of the participants, could be the last chance to record their stories; the value of these oral testimonies cannot be understated. When asked if the status of the interviewees was known, Dr. Ahlam Muhtaseb stated,

I thought the interviews were very timely as we learned that many of our interviewees have already died unfortunately. For the Palestinian side, of course, it was a more devastating death because they died in refugee camps away from their

homeland (most of them). While we don't know the actual number of those still living, I hired a fixer in 2015 to collect signed consent forms of the refugees I interviewed in Lebanon or their surviving family members. He had to trace them one by one in an expedition that went through all 9 refugee camps. He found out that about two thirds of them died, and mostly in very poor living conditions in those refugee camps.

Oral histories are vital because they provide a human element that is integral to understanding not only this war, but all conflicts across the globe. Without such understanding, wars become mere statistics on a page: body count, villages burned, populations displaced, and material damages calculated in U.S. dollars. Reducing war to statistics strips away the incalculable cost of human suffering, and serves to exacerbate the cycle of violence and misunderstanding. Indeed, U.S. mainstream news outlets have a reputation of reporting the deaths of Palestinians in terms of numbers, whereas stories on Israeli deaths often will mention the hopes and dreams of the deceased as well as interviews with mourning loved ones.⁹ *1948* succeeds in allowing both Israelis and Palestinians to tell their own accounts of this tragic history.

Oral history has often been criticized on the grounds that memories are subject to decay and subjective in nature. Indeed, human memories are not infallible and are inherently biased, but the acknowledgement and understanding of these biases can also provide valuable insight. At times it is even argued that history and the memories of individuals should dwell in two different spaces. This argument implies that the memories of an individual are less important than quantitative facts and figures. However, history and memory are forever entangled; they inhabit the same space, shape collective attitudes of the present, and influence the future. In *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Paul Thompson asserts that, "the nature of memory brings many traps for the unwary, which often explains the cynicism of those less well informed about oral sources. Yet they bring unexpected rewards to a historian who is prepared to appreciate the complexity with which reality and myth,

⁹ "Peace, Propaganda and The Promised Land," directed by Sut Jhally and Bathseba Ratzkoff (2004), DVD.

‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world both individual and collective.”¹⁰ For example, as stated earlier, the manner in which Plan D is interpreted and remembered plays a significant role in its present political significance. Those who do not view the Plan as a method for ethnic cleansing have, and will continue to, shape legislation and policy that perpetuates the process of removing Palestinians from their homeland and ensures that they will never return. *1948* is a prime example of how history and memory are eternally entwined. It provides the testimonies of men and women who lived through one of the most influential years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Through their recollections we can better grasp the ongoing pain that shapes Israeli and Palestinian views, their identities, and their futures.

By allowing those who witnessed, survived, and participated in the *Nakba* to recount their own experiences through oral testimony, *1948* enables viewers to better grasp the pain and complexity, not only of the 1948 War itself, but of the greater conflict as a whole. *1948: Creation and Catastrophe* presents the duality of the elation surrounding the creation of the state of Israel and the catastrophe of the loss of life and homeland that resulted from the displacement of the Arab Palestinians. Most importantly, the film gives those who were there witnessing, participating, suffering, and surviving a chance to relay their experiences in their own words. Capturing these voices is not only an achievement in historical preservation, but also a vital contribution to the viewer’s understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The U.S. media has perpetuated the misconception of the conflict as being an eternal hatred between religions and regularly paints Palestinian activists as hostile terrorist agents, effectively ignoring the nuanced, complex causes of the conflict. It also fails to empathize with generations of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and in refugee camps. *1948: Creation and Catastrophe* acts as a foil to this narrative and prompts the viewer to look deeper at the conflict. As the myth of eternal, incomprehensible conflict between incompatible religions falls away, the viewer can ask the question: bearing in mind the ongoing loss, pain, and suffering that has resulted from the creation of the state of Israel, what is the true cost

¹⁰ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 224.

at which it has come? And knowing this terrible cost, what can now be done to ease the pain of the past and bring peace to the future?

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Melissa Sanford is currently a junior at CSUSB majoring in History with a concentration in the Middle East. Originally a microbiology major, Melissa decided to follow her life-long love of history and switched majors prior to transferring. Her areas of interest include the Middle East, American imperialism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, ethnic cleansing and genocide. She plans on going to graduate school after obtaining her BA.

